

Statement of Russell E. Dickenson

For a Hearing Entitled: “The National Parks: Will they Survive for Future Generations?”

House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources Bellevue, Washington

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman. My name is Russ Dickenson and I want to thank you for holding this hearing today to examine the state of our national parks.

I began my tenure with the National Park Service in 1946, as a ranger in Grand Canyon National Park, and was director of the National Park Service from May of 1980 until March of 1985—from the end of the Carter administration, through the tenure of Interior Secretary James Watt, and into the second term of President Reagan. I was the only Interior Department bureau chief to be retained by the Reagan administration in 1981. During the span of my 39 years with the Park Service, I held many positions, including that of regional director for the Pacific Northwest.

I haven’t been very vocal since leaving the Park Service, but I keep a close watch on what’s going on. I keep up-to-date on NPS issues and problems, read the clips, and occasionally have advised my successors as director. In recent years I have become more and more disappointed from a distance. The national parks and the Park Service have a special place in our culture and in the hearts and souls of the American people. Yet, our government leaders are not treating them that way.

My major initiative as Director of the National Park Service was the Park Restoration and Improvement Program, which devoted more than a billion dollars over five years to park resources and facilities. But in the 20 years since I left the Park Service, the backlog has ballooned to the point where size estimates now range from \$4.5 billion to \$9.7 billion. That’s on top of the steady deterioration we’ve seen over the years in operating budgets.

If I would like to see one thing happen in NPS, it would be a renewed commitment to visitor service and interpretation, and an effort to really indoctrinate new recruits to the Service, with team spirit. The operating budget is the most critical piece of this, and I am so grateful to you, Chairman Souder, for the extraordinary lengths to which you are going to raise these issues. These hearings are of enormous importance.

As a people, we have made a significant investment in our national parks, but we’re not taking care of it. Like any investment, it can be lost if you don’t keep it up. That means paying the bills. That means fixing the shingles before water destroys the roof. That means hiring competent people, paying them appropriately, and letting them do their jobs.

The Park Service has some of the most talented and dedicated people you could hope to find in any profession. It is a professional service that, given the right tools, can preserve the most compelling pieces of our natural and cultural heritage, and can connect the American people to our parks. Only with the true support of the American people and the thoughtful intelligent management of the Service by its dedicated members, can the NPS long endure.

The capacity of park superintendents, rangers and other staff to do the job that Congress and the American people expect of them is being steadily eroded, and the morale of those great public

servants along with it. There is not a park here in the Pacific Northwest that isn't being forced to leave important jobs undone or staff positions unfilled because of insufficient budgets. This isn't a simple matter of efficiency. It's a matter of paying the bills.

Olympic National Park can hire only a fraction of the seasonal rangers they could hire only a few years ago to serve the public and provide interpretation—they lost more than 100 such positions between FY 2001 and FY 2004. Mount Rainier, an active and potentially very dangerous volcano, does not have the funds to hire a full-time vulcanologist. Despite the FY 2006 increase of \$50 million in base funding for NPS, 12 of the 14 park units in the Pacific Northwest likely will receive funding that fails to keep up with inflation.

The work Congressman Dicks and others of you have done to direct additional resources to Park Service operations is admirable and sorely needed. But it has been barely enough to stop the bleeding. We are at another point in our national history when we must re-invest in our national parks. We did it during the depression, and again in the Eisenhower-era Mission 66 program. The time for re-investment has come again. Anything less simply won't get the job done.

Even if we are able to tackle the enormous fiscal crisis facing our national parks, however, the change to Park Service management policies that has been widely publicized in recent weeks poses every bit as insidious a risk to the future of our national parks. When I was NPS director, the parks faced many serious challenges. But not even in the most challenging days of the "Watt era" did we face anything as potentially damaging to the national parks. The career personnel in NPS are extremely alarmed about this proposal, but also very fearful for their jobs. I hope you will ask the hard questions of Interior and NPS, and find out from the career professionals in the NPS what the kind of changes reported in the media really could mean. It would be unfortunate if we solved the fiscal plight of the national parks while allowing their overall meaning and fabric to be spoiled.

Mr. Chairman, I spent my professional life in the National Park Service. My interest in the parks was sparked by a college-sponsored geology field trip to Grand Canyon, where I later had the good fortune to work as a park ranger. I was proud to serve my country as a marine, a park ranger, and director of the national park service.

The national parks are still the best places anyone can go with their family, experience our country's natural wonders and learn our history. But it saddens me to think about the future of the parks if our leaders do not wake up, knowing how difficult a task my brethren in the career Park Service have before them as they attempt to carry out their charge to protect the parks for future generations. There is plenty of blame to go around for the fiscal predicament of the parks—multiple administrations, multiple congresses. But it falls to us to fix the problem, and to avoid rewriting policies in a manner that jeopardizes the ideals that became reality in 1872, with the establishment of Yellowstone.

The national parks are crying out for the kind of leadership and attention that your effort, Mr. Souder, may help provide. I hope that my great grandson, with his developing appreciation of the natural world and the national parks, will look back on this time as the turning point when our nation chose to re-invest in this wondrous gift, and redoubled our commitment to keeping these places unspoiled for generations yet to come.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to answer any questions.